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Robert Beuka. *American Icon: Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby in Critical and Cultural Context.*

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REFERENCES

Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2011. Pp. 162. ISBN: 978-1-57113-371-7

- 1 What new can another critical study on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* contribute to the already existing abundance of books concerning this national classic? Yet, in this slim and elegant volume, Robert Beuka has managed to encompass not only the formal scholarship on *Gatsby* but also a complete and thorough survey of the impact of the novel into the world of popular culture. This parallel attempt throws light on the changing modes of interpretation that have affected our understanding of the novel. At the same time, Beuka's effort to systematically categorize a wide range of critical perspectives and to lucidly summarize each scholarly work's main thesis succeeds in invoking the richness and density of America's masterwork while enhancing our appreciation of the novel's significance.
- 2 The study is divided into 5 chapters each one of which covers roughly a decade of criticism, from the year of the novel's publication (1925) to the twenty-first century.
- 3 Chapter One accounts for the early mixed reactions to *The Great Gatsby*. Beuka spots this as one of the central ironies of Fitzgerald's life and writing career that the novel that would eventually secure him a place in America's literary canon was considered, until his death, something of a flop. Shallowness, moral relativism and a shocking representation of contemporary life were some of the negative attributes to the novel while recognition of the author's maturation in terms of technique and aesthetic sensibility elicited a wide range of critical perspectives in the decade following its publication.

- 4 “There are no second acts in American lives,” is one of Fitzgerald’s more famous and often quoted observations. Nevertheless, in chapter Two, Beuka shows how the second act had come posthumously with the so-called “Fitzgerald revival” of the forties and the fifties and a renewed critical interest of *Gatsby*. Edmund Wilson’s preparation and publication of Fitzgerald’s unfinished final novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941) and his editing of the author’s confessional essays entitled *The Crack-Up* (1945) were two posthumous volumes that sparked fresh public interest in Fitzgerald. Serious scholarly reevaluation followed with most critical attention divided between issues regarding narrative perspective and form, source and influence studies, and analysis of the symbolic, thematic and mythic resonances of *Gatsby*.
- 5 With the political turmoil and civil right struggles of the later sixties and the seventies, *Gatsby* would come to be analyzed from a whole new range of approaches and perspectives (chapter Three). Critics now examined the racial, ethnic and sexual politics of the novel while other scholars approached it from a religious perspective, looking deeper into the spiritual subtext and Catholic imagery of the book. In addition to the groundbreaking works of Lionel Trilling and Arthur Mizener in the previous decade, Donald Piper, Kenneth Eble, Sergio Perosa and many more have followed offering substantial works that assessed *Gatsby*’s themes and craftsmanship while at the same time calling into question normative cultural institutions and reading practices alike.
- 6 Matthew Bruccoli would succinctly argue in his 1985 essay, that the book’s ability to provoke discourse and interpretations seemed “inexhaustible.” Indeed, the eighties and the nineties would see *Gatsby* criticism turn in manifold new directions yet again. In chapter Four, Beuka traces a new generation of scholars who, informed by poststructuralist, new historicist, and narratological theories, would consider the novel from a range of new perspectives which explored fragmented subtexts of the novel such as white America’s ethnic and national anxiety (Jeffrey Louis Decker), Fitzgerald’s personal and aesthetic homosexual panic (Frances Kerr), Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque (Richard Godden and Michael Holquist), narratological analyses of the novel’s formal structures (Patti White) and a sustained interest in the historicity of the text (Ronald Berman), a trend that continues in the new millennium.
- 7 In chapter Five, Beuka discusses critical desire to push established models of thought about *Gatsby* in new directions, citing essays that explore the performativity of class status (Scott Donaldson), the obsession of eros and eroticism of the day (Kirk Curnutt), the significance of jazz music in the novel (Mitchell Breitweiser), the racial ambiguity of *Gatsby* (Meredith Goldsmith), his ethnic marginalization (Barbara Will) or the text being a narrative of racial passing (Carlyle Van Thomson). In his exhaustive but not exhausting presentation of the manifold perspectives on *The Great Gatsby*, Beuka also includes a subchapter on the use of the text as an assigned novel in college and high school classrooms. There he points out that the novel ranks among the top five in most frequently taught American works in the US and considers this as one key factor for the ascent of *Gatsby* from forgotten period piece to national classic. He also takes an extensive look at the 2009 Bryer and VanArsdale’s volume to teaching the novel, aptly entitled *Approaches to Teaching Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.”* Among the widely varied essays included in this volume, “Love, Loss, and Real Estate: Teaching *The Great Gatsby* in the Suburban Age” is authored by Beuka himself. Beuka’s essay advances our understanding of how landscape functions in the novel through the careful juxtaposition of myth and reality, romance and realism. According to the author, *Gatsby* can be read as

a proto-suburban narrative that chronicles the commodification of the natural landscape.

- 8 Beuka's study would be incomplete without reference to what critic Richard Anderson dubbed the "long shadow" cast by the novel on our own times. The novel's remarkable presence in twenty-first century popular culture can be traced in the "Gatsby"-themed bars, restaurants, web comic strips, video games, musical connections, and of course the number of stage and film adaptations in recent years.
- 9 Such a combination of the popular with the critical aspects of *Gatsby*, of the familiar with the new enables Beuka's volume to serve both those beginning a study of the novel (and American fiction in general), and those continuing that investigation. It was a pleasure for me to read and learn from Robert Beuka's *American Icon*. This is an essential book for anyone who has any level of interest in American literature and culture, and a valuable contribution to the field of Fitzgerald scholarship.

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